Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences

Crossing Dialogues Association

DIALOGUES

Empathy: an integration and differentiation process

FEDERICA FERRARI
Independent Researcher, Rome (Italy)
Email: fedeferrars@gmail.com

DIAL PHIL MENT NEURO SCI 2020; 13(1): 32-33

In his article, Aragona (2019) describes some theories about the construct of empathy, starting from the development of the ability to differentiate between the self and the other, even according to cognitive functions engaged. Quoting Vella, he emphasizes that interpersonal relationships necessary follow the self-individuation process of the subjects involved, although the dual relationship between child and caregiver is an exception. There have been several developments of the theories on the self-other differentiation inside the mother-child dyad, starting from a "fusional state" vision of the infant, with enlarged self-boundaries in which the breast, in its feeding function, was incorporated by the baby as part of himself. More recent views, in particular that proposed by Stern (1985) with his program of Infant Research, consider the existence of a sensory-motor system, which is already capable in stimulus differentiation since the beginning. In this view, the baby has an active role in the mother-child interaction, with the competence to discriminate his own actions onto the external world and the opposite. Therefore, while crying for hunger, the baby practices his own finalized action directed to the world in order to receive food. According to Perls (1947), the act of sucking is a reflex that is still part of a receiving position of the infant, and yet there is already some activity towards the object which he calls "hanging on bite". Moreover, looking at the mother-child relationship, we can individuate in what we usually call maternal intuition, for example the recognition of the baby crying (because of food, pain, the need of changing the diaper), a primary ability of emotional confluence based on projection. Feeling as one leads the caregiver to anticipate the baby's needs. A "mother good enough", in Winnicott's (1973) words, is a mother who leans towards an undifferentiated sense between herself and her child. This state works as it was preexisting to the single individualities. Because of this, the psychological development is defined as a gradual individuation and differentiation process, starting from the first "No". This differentiation process can develop inside the baby if, little by little, there is an acquisition of cognitive functions such as symbolization, abstraction and generalization. Thanks to the language, the babies produce a categorical thinking that enhances the possibility to recognize and discriminate bodily sensations, and then to differentiate between oneself and other. The experience of someone who is taking care of you is at the basis of the capability to recognize oneself as one of the subjects of the dual relationship. At the same time, that specific experience defines a self-image (love-worthy or not), and an image of the other that afterwards is generalized to the external world (reliable or not), becoming in Bowlby's (1973) words an *internal working model*, i.e. a relational behavioral automatic scheme. Such model will actively influence the perception of the other and of the relationship, leading to intersubjective complexity. Therefore, the quality of this dual experience, the pre-existing sense of self, highly influences the empathic relationship through such internal models, even after the cognitive development is completed. We can see this, for instance, in the individual differences of emotional contact with the other, in the consequent avoiding styles (confluence,

retroflection, egotism), in the defense mechanism of projection and projective identification. After all, in some circumstances of adult life, emotional undifferentiated states similar to those involved in the mother-baby relationship can be useful, for example at the beginning of a love relationship. Of course, in this case there is an emotional undifferentiated state together with preserved awareness of being two distinct individualities. As Aragona (2019) emphasizes, empathy is not possible until we develop a sense of distinction between the self and the other, thanks to cognitive processes. Talking about empathy, that is not confluence with the other, we are reflecting about boundaries, about the distinction between what is inside and outside oneself. However, such cognitive functions are a necessary condition but not the only one. Indeed, mere thinking without its connections with bodily signals detaches from the emotional contact, which is fundamental for empathy. The root of the word emotion (*ex-movere*), indicates that there is something that moves inside us, and the movement is possible through the muscles, through the body. At the same time, in the body we find mirror neurons that react to the emotional state of someone in front of us. Therefore, there are several physical feedbacks involved in the empathy process. By directing attention on them, the person becomes aware of them and able to differentiate its own emotions from the other's, in a flowing movement between inside and outside oneself. Starting from body awareness, is necessary to be aware of one's internal working models, identifying how, how much, and when they become active in the perception of the other in a new relationship. We can have a full empathic contact through introspective analysis of our projections, and a distinction between the other's feelings and our emotional response to them.

Aragona (2019) stresses the importance of this kind of work, especially in psychotherapy: therapeutic empathy is neither emotional contagion nor mere cognitive inference; rather it involves a deliberate technical level. In my opinion, it is based on the intentional quality of the perception, which is part of a deliberate act and not just an implicit, automatic activation. Similarly, the need of explicit clarification is also needed for the sociocultural ground. Indeed, implicit processes are based on cultural models, i.e. specific social schemas about behaviors and relationships, socially shared in specific contexts. It is important to consider them even when the aim is to reduce the perceived distances, otherwise the risk is to automatically interpret as similar something that just looks alike but is very different if seen from inside someone else's shoes.

REFERENCES

Aragona M. (2019) The hermeneutic complexity of therapeutic empathy. Dial Phil Ment Neuro Sci, 12: 75-76.

Bowlby J. (1973) Attachment and separation. Basic Books, New York.

Perls F. (1947) Ego, hunger and aggression. George Allen & Unwin, London.

Stern D. (1985) The interpersonal world of the infant. Basic Books, New York.

Winnicott D. W. (1973) The child, the family and the outside world. Penguin Books, London.